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ABSTRACT

This report provides an informal discussion of observations conducted in twenty-three classrooms in six schools. Observations focused on instruction in reading comprehension in grades three through six. The report also comments on comprehension instruction, on the teaching of word meanings, phonics instruction, and on the presence of extra teachers or teaching aides in the classroom. (AA)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 1

COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION--WHERE ARE YOU?

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Comprehension Instruction--Where Are You?

In the summer of 1976, the National Institute of Education issued an RFP (Request for Proposal) that stemmed from its interest in establishing a research center to learn more about reading comprehension. My efforts to contribute to the proposal being submitted by the University of Illinois had a number of byproducts that included persistent thoughts about comprehension instruction. One was as basic and unsettling as, What is comprehension instruction?

Definitions of Comprehension Instruction

Attempts to define comprehension instruction can follow at least two paths. One begins by equating reading with comprehending; it therefore concludes by asserting that whatever is done to help children acquire reading ability can be called comprehension instruction. Within this broad framework, instruction concerned with such things as whole word identification, phonic and structural analyses, and word meanings belongs under the umbrella called "comprehension instruction." And this seems logical. After all, if the identification or meaning of too many words is unknown, problems with comprehension (however it's defined) follow.

Although seeming to be logical, equating comprehension instruction with anything that helps children become readers has one obvious drawback. It makes comprehension instruction so global and all-inclusive that it no longer is a separate entity. That is, as it becomes everything, it becomes nothing in particular. The loss of identity suggests that another path might be taken to arrive at a definition. This one bypasses single, isolated words and puts comprehension instruction into a framework that only includes instruction that helps readers understand phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and more.

Classroom Observations

Using the latter definition to define the focus, I observed in twenty-three classrooms last year. Carried out in six schools, the observations were done for two reasons, neither of which was mentioned to the observed teachers. The first reason was to acquire some general impressions of what teachers do to help children cope with more than single, unrelated words. On the assumption that attention to connected text would be common after the first two grades, the majority of classrooms visited were in the grade 3-6 range.

The second reason for the visits was to prepare for the more extensive and systematic classroom studies of comprehension instruction that are taking place under the sponsorhsip of the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois.

What the Observations Revealed about Comprehension Instruction

When instruction with the identification and meaning of individual words is eliminated and the more circumscribed definition of comprehension instruction is used, one conclusion (based on twenty-three classrooms, each of which was visited once) is that not much is done that could be called comprehension instruction. Typically, when the observed teachers were working on comprehension, they were either asking questions or checking children's answers. Asking questions, however, appears to be a way to prepare for comprehension whereas checking answers is a method for finding out whether comprehension did in fact take place. One could thus argue that neither of these practices could or should be called comprehension instruction.

What's left? That is, what else was seen in the twenty-three classrooms that dealt with connected text? Descriptions follow. They are listed in the order in which they happened to have been observed.

In a fourth-grade class, a group was reading in round-robin fashion. When one oral reader failed to stop at a period, the teacher commented, "Let your voice drop. See that period? That's your stop sign."

A group of third graders was working on topic sentences via commercial worksheets. The teacher began the lesson by reminding them that a topic sentence tells in just a few words what a paragraph says, and that it can appear at any place in the paragraph. Following the review, the children read paragraphs silently, then took turns reading topic sentences aloud. Afterward, the focus shifted to trade books. (Earlier, all had been asked to bring their library books to where this lesson was taking place.) The plan was to have the children take turns reading aloud any paragraph from their books, after which they were to tell what the topic sentence was. Execution of the plan was short-lived, however, for it quickly became obvious that material from the real world (unlike the contrived material of worksheets and workbooks) does not always have topic sentences.

One third-grade teacher wrote pairs of sentences on the board (e.g., Juliana couldn't buy the necktie because she had no money. Because she had no money, Juliana wasn't able to buy the necktie.) Members of the instructional group had to decide whether each pair said the same thing. If it did not, how the content differed was explained.

To summarize a story they had just read silently, the same third-grade group was asked to fill in three columns that were headed "Ideas for Earning Money," "Why They Wouldn't Work," and "Why They Would Work".

One third grade teacher was helping children sort out the relevant from the irrelevant by asking questions that were to be answered by reading from the story that had just been finished. If what a child read included more than what was required to answer the question, the excess was discussed. The same procedure was followed whenever what was read was too skimpy to answer a question.

Members of an instructional group in one fourth grade silently read the directions at the top of a designated page in a workbook, then one explained what he would do to complete the page. Intermittently, certain details in a set of directions received explicit attention. About a dozen workbook pages were used, each having a different type of direction.

Noticeable by their absence from the above descriptions are fifth and sixth grades. Although observed, older children tended to spend their time answering questions, sometimes orally but more often in writing. In one fifth grade, the children had to copy both the questions and their answers. In another, written answers were required and so too was flexibility. Subsequent to answering questions about a selection concerned with fishing, the children were immediately directed to read about going to the moon.

The requirement of written answers was much less common in the earlier grades; very common there, however, was what seemed like an excessive number of questions. This was especially noticeable when basal manuals were followed closely. In one second grade, for instance, a story had been read silently and attention was going to questions about it. The page-by-page interrogation took the following form: "Which sentence tells whether Betty found the goat? . . . Read it, John . . . . What did she say when she found it? . . . Carol, read what she said . . . ."

Word Meanings

While instruction with connected text was infrequent in the classrooms that were visited, many teachers did give time to word meanings--certainly an area that is related to comprehension. One of the most interesting sources for helping with meanings was found in a school that had turned an empty classroom into a museum. Filled with attractive arrangements of materials that were accompanied by cards posing interesting questions, the room was most enticing. The person responsible for the displays explained that all the materials had been brought in by the children and that, as soon as possible, informational books about the contributions were added to the museum library. On the day I visited, displayed materials included rocks, shells, rusted pieces of metal, plants, Mexican art, pine cones, and a bird's nest. As the visit ended, the person in charge used much psychological jargon to explain that children with reading problems have often lost touch with reality and that the museum was meant to help with this. She was surprised when I said that I thought it was the school that had lost touch. Later, I wished that this teacher had accompanied me to my next observation, one made in a third grade in the same building. Although it was October, a bulletin board in the room still displayed the words, "Welcome Back to School!"

If word meanings are as much caught as they are taught, then it could be said that a third grade teacher in another building would be highly successful in expanding children's vocabularies. In a brief amount of time she was heard to say such things as:

"That's quite a feat."

"That's an aerial view of it, isn't it?"

"What's the moral of this story?"

"Your original copy was not nearly so professional."

"I'll have to survey the situation before I decide."

Another teacher--this one in a fourth grade classroom--would probably be less successful. She had divided a bulletin board for news items into four parts by printing the words "Locally", "Statewide", "Nationally", and "Worldly."

While work with word meanings ought to add to children's comprehension, how it is carried on can inhibit them from using existing abilities. Such a possibility became apparent during the first observation, which was in a sixth grade. The entire class had copies of Current Science, a newspaper-like publication. At the time of the visit, various articles were being read aloud. Since the material was unfamiliar, much of the reading was poor. Much of it was also difficult to hear. The teacher appeared to be using the reading to work on vocabulary because whenever a word appeared whose meaning might be unknown, the oral reader was stopped and questioned: "What does deadlocked mean? Look at the words around it. Does anybody know what it means? Let's see what Mr. Webster has to say about it." A child would then be asked to find the troublesome word in the dictionary and to read the definitions aloud. Since what Mr. Webster had to say was often difficult for the reader to cope with, clearly understood definitions did not always emerge. It is not likely that much comprehension of Current Science emerged either; there were just too many interruptions from Mr. Webster and others.

Phonics

Once dictionaries enter classrooms and glossaries enter basal readers phonics comes close to exiting as a source of help for pronunciations. At

least this was the case in the grade 4-6 classrooms that were visited. I first became aware of the frequency with which children are told, "Look it up in the glossary" while observing a fourth grade in which round robin reading from a basal was going on. Even when a troublesome word was regularly spelled and had a meaning likely to be familiar, the direction still was, "Look it up in your glossary." Not once, in fact, were the children ever encouraged to decode words themselves even though they were in a school system that teaches what I would call an excessive amount of phonics in the primary grades.

Because none of the upper grade observations revealed encouragement to use phonics, I later discussed the omission with an acquaintance who teaches sixth grade. Her response was honest, revealing, and went something like this: Having never taught anything but the upper grades, I know nothing about phonics. Hopefully, the kids do use it, but I'm not about to get involved with phonics myself. Besides, they need to know how to use a dictionary.

Although a small number of classroom observations hardly allows for generalizations, the consistency in what the few revealed prompts the question, Does it make any sense to spend thousands of dollars and hours teaching phonics in the primary grades if nothing is done in subsequent years to encourage children to use it?

That a great deal of time is spent on phonics in the primary grades was confirmed each time one was visited. That much about the phonics instruction was characterized by flaws referred to in previous articles (Durkin, 1974) was also confirmed. Still common, for example, is the use of commercial materials that have children work on tasks that will add

nothing to their ability to decode unknown words. Most of the time, as a matter of fact, the recently observed children were working with words they could read. When this was called to the attention of a third grade teacher who had just assigned a workbook page dealing with syllabication, she said, "I hope they can read all the words. Otherwise they won't be able to do the page." Her comment was interesting for it showed how easily means can become ends in themselves. Phonics is supposed to be a means for helping children identify words. But now I was hearing that the children had to read the words in order to do a phonics assignment.

Other Observations

Whereas materials like workbooks and worksheets were omnipresent in the twenty-three classrooms that were visited, materials like chalkboards were used sparingly especially in the middle and upper grades. At all levels, in fact, it was rare to find teachers using a board to introduce, explain, or review anything. In many instances, board space was covered so that even if a teacher wanted to show or point out something, nothing was available to help.

What was available to help in a number of the classrooms was extra adults. Their presence, however, seemed to have little positive effect on instructional programs. The most apparent example of this was in a school in which all the fifth and sixth graders were divided into ability groups for a 90-minute language arts period. The lowest group, deliberately kept smaller than the others, was comprised of 17 children. On the day they were observed, these children were in a room with one classroom teacher, two Title I teachers, and one Title I aide. I naturally expected to see superior instruction but, in fact, saw none. The classroom teacher spent

the time with seven children preparing for, administering, and checking a spelling test. Meanwhile, the aide listened to individual children read aloud while the two extra teachers supervised the use of SRA Reading Laboratory materials.

In a third grade in which there were many poor readers, two teachers were present. Again, one was with a Title I program. At the time of the observation, she had just started a lesson with a group of five boys who were much more excited about a pencil than they were about the basal reader they were being told to open. The pencil, which belonged to one of the boys, was advertising a new furniture store. A die had been attached to one end; and, written on the side were the words "Don't gamble on quality. See us first." At the time the pencil was taken from its owner, he and his friends were trying hard to read the slogan. Since they did anything but try hard to read the assigned story--all claimed they had read it when they were in second grade--it would have been better had the teacher temporarily laid aside the basal in order to allow for attention to the pencil, which had a lot of instructional potential. The meaning of "Don't gamble on quality," for instance, might have been contrasted with the meaning of something like "Don't gamble on a horse." The words die and dice could have been written and discussed; and words like quality and quantity might have been considered along with such questions as, When is quality more important than quantity? Is quantity ever more important than quality?

Questions that schools need to consider include the one that asks, Are fewer teachers ever better than more teachers? I raise this question because as a classroom observer I couldn't help but be aware of the large number of children who were constantly leaving and arriving. Just keeping track of who goes to which teacher (and when) is a big and, I would think, an annoying

chore. I wondered how many of the teachers being observed shared a thought that was frequently running through my mind as I sat in the corner; namely, how great it would be to have a classroom in which there were no interruptions--including interruptions by people who want to observe.

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